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SUBJECT: Greek Education Reform Expert Wants U.S. Help

REF: ATHENS 260

CLASSIFIED BY: Daniel V. Speckhard, Ambassador, State, Executive;
REASON: 1.4(B), (D)

¶1. (C) Summary: In a March 26 meeting with PAO and CAO, Greek education reform expert Babiniotis shared GoG plans and timelines, and enthusiastically welcomed U.S. assistance on implementing a national university entrance exam system based on the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT). End summary.

¶2. (C) Prominent linguist, scholar, former rector of Athens University (2000-2006) and GoG expert responsible for reforming the Greek university entrance exam system, Professor George Babiniotis, met with PAO and CAO on March 26. Babiniotis was candid about the failings of the educational system in Greece, and the challenges to implementing reforms.

¶3. (C) The current university admittance system is untenable, Babiniotis said. Most parents and students view a university degree as the ticket to advancement, which is the reason that more than 100,000 students apply each year for the 40,000 university slots. To be competitive, high school students concentrate on private institution (frontistiria)-provided university preparatory classes rather than their regular school classes. As a result secondary students memorize material to pass the examinations rather than really mastering subject matter. "We are graduating aspiring university students rather than well-educated kids," he lamented.

U.S. Assistance on University Testing Needed

¶4. (C) Babiniotis wants to change the current university entrance system to one similar to that in the U.S., based on a combination of high school grades and performance on a standardized exam similar to the SAT, which students can take whenever they feel ready to do so, thereby minimizing the pressure on students and the reliance on frontistiria. At present the future of each student depends on the performance on the day of the entrance examination. Greece needs to develop a data bank of questions and computer based testing allowing students the freedom to take the examinations at a date of their convenience and to take the examination more than once. (Tests derived from data banks select by random a limited number of questions for a particular examination out of the tens of thousands of possible questions.) With a large data bank of questions, each examination would be unique for each test taker, making it almost impossible to cheat or memorize test questions in advance. Babiniotis enthusiastically accepted PAO's offer to provide U.S. expertise on computerized testing as the GoG moves down this path.

Prospects for Reform are Good

¶5. (C) According to Babiniotis, political prospects for educational reform are improving. New Democracy and the opposition PASOK parties are working together on a solution; Babiniotis has seen PASOK's proposals (reftel) and thinks they are "logical," but added that it is easier to push such reforms when in the opposition. Babiniotis agreed that the elections for leadership of the university teachers union (POSDEP), which ousted the radicals supported by SYRIZA, was an indication that the university community was eager for a change. Up to now the union had

supported all calls for strikes and disruptions of instruction at the university. There is even support to reduce the percentage from 40% of student representation in university decisions. There is mounting pressure on both major parties from the public for substantive reform, and soon.

¶6. (C) Primary school reform will be easiest, Babiniotis predicted, while high school and university reform will be bigger challenges due to political posturing and the politicization of students. There needs to be a change in the mindset of the public, which views university education as the only vehicle to advancement. At the university level, Greece needs to scale back on the number of institutions of higher learning - currently 23 universities and 15 technical schools (TEI) country-wide, according to Babiniotis, while the remaining TEIs need to be strengthened to meet the needs of the marketplace. A number of TEI need to be incorporated into the departments of universities, Babiniotis said; those universities, in turn, need more autonomy on decisions related to budget, curriculum, enrollment and faculty.

University Problems: Politicization of Students and Abuse of Asylum

¶7. (C) University students have become too politicized, Babiniotis lamented, a holdover from the days of the military dictatorship in Greece. This excessive politicization has caused serious disruptions in university operations. Asylum is being abused to the point where well-meaning students - the majority - suffer in their pursuit of a higher education. While some students turn to private education, their degrees are still not recognized by the Greek state and, Babiniotis believes, will not be unless there is broad political agreement to amend the Greek Constitution to formally allow private education. While opposition PASOK leader George Papandreou originally supported amending the constitution, according to Babiniotis, he later backtracked and the issue of private education remains unresolved.

¶8. (C) Comment: Babiniotis is a knowledgeable, respected academic who knows the Greek educational system well and appears to have support from both New Democracy and PASOK. Our meeting with him, and his enthusiastic acceptance of our offer of U.S. help on university entrance testing, has opened the door to U.S. input and expertise on one of the most important reforms in recent Greek history. In the coming months, Post will consult with the Department on best ways to provide U.S. advice and assistance.

SPECKHARD